

LAOS

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INTERPRETIVE REPORT

U.S. Seeks to Hide Scope of Its Role in Laos

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VIENTIANE—American officials admit the U.S. mission in Laos is deliberately hiding the extent of American military involvement here.

"Americans may think they know what we are doing here," one official said in referring to frequent press reports on U.S. activities in Laos, "but we do not want Americans to look into their television sets and be able to see Americans going into action in Laos."

The official made his remark in a complaint about an American Broadcasting Corp. team led by Ted Koppel which tried to film Americans getting into a helicopter in the south Laos combat area two weeks ago.

"What we are doing here in Laos is totally inconsistent with our kind of society," a top U.S. diplomat here told a correspondent recently. "We are fighting a war by covert means and an open society can't tolerate that."

The diplomat explained that the U.S. was breaking the Geneva peace accords in Laos and "we don't want to advertise it."

The same official feels the embassy's policy of secrecy has been successful in not advertising U.S. infringements of the accords.

"You could write a lot worse about what we are doing here," he said, declining to go into further details.

Unfortunately, any diplomat in Vientiane will call this Geneva accords excuse hogwash.

The U.S. since President Nixon's remarks last year, has admitted in general terms the gamut of its operations here.

The Russians, who are co-chairmen with the British of the Geneva accords, have not raised any question about U.S. violations of them. Soviets in Vientiane admit the presence of North Vietnamese in Laos in violation of the accords and seem to think it natural Americans should try to counter this.

Now U.S. officials prefer to offer national security as the reason for their refusal to

frankly discuss the U.S. role in Laos, but a close look at just what is being hidden and how it is being hidden refutes this claim.

An example of this is U.S. air activities over northern Laos and parts of Laos other than the Ho Chi Minh Trail area.

These activities—anything from 60 to 300 sorties a day—are described in Saigon communiques, telling of attacks on the Trail as "in addition U.S. Air Force aircraft flew combat support missions in Laos for royal Laotian forces."

There is no further information, such as the numbers of sorties, the nature of the targets, the results, etc.

In Vientiane, the air attaché's office in charge of preparing these strikes refuses even to speak to correspondents.

A favorite tactic in Saigon is to refer a correspondent to Vientiane for information. In Vientiane, Americans suggest a correspondent should go to Saigon for information.

To claim that such information is withheld for national or military security reasons is somewhat ridiculous.

Obviously, the North Vietnamese or Pathet Lao know the strike was made. It's difficult to see how the number of sorties and their cost could help the enemy.

Information on targets and strikes is given in South Vietnam after operations. Why not on Laos?

The only answer to this seems to be that President Nixon, despite his promise in March 1970 to "continue to give the American people the fullest possible information" on the U.S. role in Laos, does not wish the public to realize just how large U.S. air support of the Laos government is daily and that air strikes are not limited to the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Then there is the matter of the U.S. ground involvement in Laos.

There can be no doubt this includes a combat ground involvement by personnel hired

by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Laotians and Meos talk constantly of American "commando leaders" based at Pakkoo, a few miles southeast of the U.S. base at Long Cheng in northeast Laos.

Besides these "commando leaders," there are CIA case officers hired by the agency from the U.S. military who run Lao and other ethnic guerrilla units as well as Thai units.

This operation has put the U.S. in the position of being responsible for the defense of Laos through what is supposed to be a U.S. intelligence gathering agency.

These guerrilla units are stationed in front of royal Lao regular troops and the brunt of combat with North Vietnamese regulars.

The Lao military, whose understanding of guerrilla warfare is limited, berate the CIA when these units retreat from positions under shellfire, or let North Vietnamese through to attack regular Lao units.

The high ethnic casualties

are being replaced by Thai regular troops who are fighting in the Laotian mountains.

The U.S. Embassy does its utmost to prevent correspondents getting to areas of Laos where American-led guerrilla units operate.

Correspondents are refused permission to fly on U.S. aircraft to these areas, which is the only means of getting there unless one wants to risk a 5 or 10-day walk through territory mined and patrolled by Communist Guerrillas.

While reporters are not allowed on the planes, Laotian civilians with official status are.

"National security" is invoked against correspondents wanting to go to Long Cheng even though there are at least 20,000 Asian civilians living there. And anyone from Vientiane who has a relative or friend at Long Cheng can visit.

U.S. officials also refuse to discuss American casualties in Laos (currently 700 dead and missing) or how much is spent (\$2 billion annually).

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